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ABSTRACT

Two studies were designed to assess the extent to which portrayal of disability on television programs affects attitudes toward the disabled. In study I, eighth graders who viewed an episode of a television series--an episode featuring a blind character--did not reveal significant changes in attitudes when compared to a control group, composed of eighth graders who viewed another episode of the series--an episode with no depiction of disability. It was found, however, that Ss who viewed a professional film designed to educate regarding disability did have significantly altered attitudes. In study II, college males revealed similar patterns of attitude change after viewing the educational film. It was suggested that the film was effective because it provided information that would facilitate better interaction, thus reducing anxiety in nondisabled persons. Passive participation and the subtle nature of the information provided were thought to have been factors in the lack of attitude change produced by the portrayal of disability in the television program episode. (CL)

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Attitude Change toward Disability

through

Television Portrayals with Male College Students

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The purpose of these studies was to assess the extent to which portrayal of disability on television programs affects the attitudes of a population toward the disabled. The following questions were asked: Are attitudes toward the disabled altered by viewing a portrayal of disability in a television program? Are attitudes toward the disabled altered by viewing a professionally produced film designed to educate regarding disability?

Sample for Study I

Subjects for the original study came from an eighth grade class, selected because of the high level of television viewing expected by the researchers. The Dukes of Hazzard and Dallas were the most popular programs reported by the subjects. Subjects were randomly assigned to treatment and control groups.

Procedure for Study I

Experimental group 1 viewed an episode from Mork and Mindy selected by the researchers as non-stereotypic because the actor in reality was blind and the character he portrayed was independent in mobility and personal adjustment, was employed, and appeared to be assertive in his behavior. The character was nonstereotypic as described by Leonard (1978). Experimental group 2 viewed a professional film developed by the American Foundation for the Blind entitled What do you do when you meet a blind person? The control group viewed another episode of the Mork and Mindy series having no depiction of disability. Subjects in each of the groups were given Form A of the Attitudes Toward Disabled Persons Scale (Yuker, Block, & Young, 1966) then given the treatment followed by Form B.

Results of Study I

Experimental group 1 and the control group experienced no significant differences between the pretest and posttest. Experimental group 2 exhibited an increase in the means between the pretest and posttest at $p < .05$. An analysis of variance on the pretests indicated no significant differences between any two groups. A significant difference was evidenced between experimental group 2 and the other two groups in the analysis of variance on the posttests. The Scheffe procedure identified experimental group 2 as significantly different from the other two groups at $p < .05$. Attitudes toward the disabled were not altered significantly by viewing a portrayal of disability in the television program studied here. However, the experiment did yield evidence that attitudes toward the disabled were altered by viewing a professionally produced film designed to educate regarding disability.

Sample for Study II

The replication study sample consisted of college males living in a residence hall in a large Southern university. Interested persons responded to advertisements circulated throughout the dormitory requesting subjects for a study investigating television. These persons signed an informed consent form. Once collected, the forms were shuffled and randomly divided into three separate groups to allow for two experimental groups and one control group.

Past research findings worthy of consideration have suggested that females tend to score higher on the ATDP than males and higher scores tend to occur with higher levels of education. Therefore, the researchers chose a male population where attitude change could be observed.

Procedure for Study II

Fifteen minutes were allotted for subjects to fill out Form A of the ATDP. After these instruments were gathered each group viewed an audiovisual presentation. Experimental group 1 viewed a videotaped episode of the ABC television series Mork and Mindy which featured a depiction of disability considered nonstereotypic by the researchers. Experimental group 2 viewed the film What do you do when you meet a blind person? developed by the American Foundation for the Blind. The control group viewed an educational film addressing the topic of time management. After the presentations subjects were administered Form B of the ATDP. Once all subjects completed the questionnaire they were allowed to leave. This is the same procedure used in the study with the eighth grade sample (Elliott & Byrd, 1982).

Results of Study II

The pretests from the college male sample and the eighth grade sample yielded significant differences (see Tables 3 and 4). Dependent t-tests indicated no significant differences in the pretests and posttests of the control group and experimental group 1, but did reveal a significant difference between pre- and posttest of the group that viewed the film developed by the American Foundation for the Blind (see Table 5).

A significant difference exists between the scores on the pretests between the college male sample and the eighth grade sample. Based on the results on the t-tests, college males responded similarly to the eighth grade sample after viewing the television episode and film What do you do when you meet a blind person?

Discussion

Recent studies by Antonak (1981) and Rice (1979) have questioned the variables of educational level and age as factors in the formation of attitudes toward disabled persons. Yet the significant differences between the pretests of the eighth grade sample and the college male sample suggest the college male subjects expressed more positive attitudes toward disabled individuals. This supports conclusions by Yuker, Block, and Young (1966) that suggested college students tend to make more positive attitudes than upper-elementary grade students.

The experimental groups in both studies viewing the film produced by the American Foundation for the Blind scored in a significantly positive direction on the posttests. Scores from both groups increased in a significant positive direction. The film appears to foster more positive attitudes toward disabled persons. The format of the film employs humor and logic in disseminating information concerning blindness. The film also provides direct information to facilitate better interaction between non-disabled persons and blind persons, making the film material relevant to the needs of the audience. The balance of an emotional and rational appeal and the relevance of the material in a visual presentation are considered by Bernotavicz (1979) to be critical in modifying attitudes toward the disabled. By giving information that would facilitate better interaction, the film may effectively reduce anxiety in a non-disabled person which would be detrimental to interaction with a disabled person (Donaldson, 1980). In general, the film appears to address many concerns of the non-disabled person regarding blindness and provide accurate information and insights that enhance interaction.

The single television episode failed to elicit any measurable response in either study. Information provided in the episode may have been too subtle and overshadowed by the comedy format of the program. Exposure to a portrayal of disability on a single television episode may not have the focus, relevance, and concise order of argument needed to alter attitudes toward disability. Passive participation of the audience while viewing the episode may contribute to the results. Bernotavicz (1979) recommends a more active participation of the audience with the visual presentation to develop an environment wherein ideas and thoughts may be exchanged that would modify existing predispositions. In light of current theories concerning college student development subjects may have processed information in the film from developmental stages that would prefer more concrete, tangible orientations toward people and behavior in general. These theories may be applicable to the findings of this study; nine of the sixteen college subjects in experimental group 1 were freshmen in their first quarter of college life. These subjects may have been processing information through a more dualistic orientation toward the immediate environment (Knefelcamp, Widick, & Parker, 1978).

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